

## Life as an Adjunct: Theorizing Autonomy from the Personal to the Political

*Paula Droege*

Soon I will begin another year as an adjunct professor of philosophy, an itinerant worker on the farms of young minds. I have made deliberate, reasoned choices that have led me to this position. So, on many fine accounts of autonomy, I am a rational, self-reflective person and therefore autonomous. Then why do I feel so rotten about myself sometimes? One reason is that I am not a perfectly self-consistent person with transparent, unified needs and desires. Like most people, especially women, my life is full of tensions, complicated by conflicting interests, and feeling rotten is a symptom of this self-conflict. An adequate account of autonomy should accommodate the reality of self-conflict in its description of conditions for autonomous action. But how? The problem is, roughly, that autonomy involves living one's own life and pursuing one's own interests, so it seems difficult for a person whose life is in tension to act autonomously.

The drawback of traditional accounts of autonomy is that they locate the source of self-conflict within the psyche of individual women, a personal problem for the woman alone to address. While this work is important in speaking to the experience of women in conflict, it is unable to address the structural sources of the tension between self-conflict and autonomy.

What I need is an account of autonomy that explains how I can be autonomous even though (1) I have been socialized to have various beliefs and values, and (2) some sets of my beliefs and values conflict with one another. Section I draws on the work of theorists Marilyn Friedman and Diana Tietjens Meyers to outline a theory of autonomy that can accommodate the influence of the social. While social structures shape the development of desires and interests, self-reflection allows for critical review of conventional norms. Unfortunately, more than one set of conventional norms exist: there are gender norms, racial and ethnic norms, professional norms, and so on. Section II explores the tension between autonomy and self-conflict that results from incompatible normative systems, or "worlds." This tension is especially acute in accounts that take a unified self as prerequisite to autonomous action. Recognition of self-conflict calls for a more complex account of autonomy that addresses the way actions that accord with one set of values constrain actions in accord with another set.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, given the *political* reality that members of subordinated groups are likely to suffer self-conflict due to their subordinated status, the consequence of conflict for autonomy demands a political response.

Section III argues that the tension between autonomy and self-conflict compromises the legitimacy of political liberalism. Because liberalism depends on the autonomy of its citizenry to motivate and ground political obligation, liberal government has a corollary responsibility to develop the autonomy of its citizens. In this light the constraints on the autonomy of a woman suffering self-conflict is not just a personal problem; it is a political one. Likewise, political solutions are not simply beneficial, they are necessary to political justification. Therefore, liberal systems are minimally obliged to develop and support institutions and practices requisite for autonomy. Section IV carries the argument a step further by arguing that a liberal government has the additional responsibility to reform the structures of subordination that limit autonomy. While self-conflict may be an inevitable feature of human lives and compatible with autonomous action, conditions that compromise autonomy must be treated as a public injustice rather than a private disability.

### I. Autonomy in Context

Before we can consider the political, however, we must begin with the personal. This section will consider what autonomy involves and how autonomous action is possible, given the constraints of social structures. So, we may ask, what makes my actions autonomous? In other words, what constitutes acting on “my own” rather than merely responding as a socially conditioned creature? My answer to this question—self-reflection authenticates values—is neither unique nor complete; I do not pretend to offer a full theory of autonomy here. Rather, I draw on several sources with the primary goal of reconciling socialization and autonomy. Actions are chosen within a set of expectations and responsibilities largely beyond our control. Yet, despite the fact that our desires and values are socially formed and conditioned, humans have the capacity to reflect on them and subsequently endorse or reject them. Reflective capacities admit degrees of various sorts, but are inconsistent with coercion. Consequently, an autonomous action—that is, one that is authentic, my own—is one that accords with values developed through a process of self-reflection which was free of coercive influences. The following will elaborate these conditions in turn, noting how my own actions count as autonomous according to these criteria: (1) self-reflection and endorsement; (2) degrees of reflection and endorsement; and (3) lack of coercion.

The foremost condition of authenticity is the process of self-conscious evaluation that articulates the sort of life that counts as “one’s own.” If I have never considered my desires and values, there is little reason to view them as my own rather than as features of a body or a society I inherit.<sup>2</sup> To mark a distinction between “me” and “not me” in a way that can delineate actions as authentically my own, I must be able to conceive of myself as a person consisting of a unique set of concerns, desires, and commitments.<sup>3</sup>

This is not to deny that the concept I form of myself is deeply influenced by my native environment. Parents teach socially appropriate beliefs and behaviors,

the language which shapes ideas, and the value system by which actions are judged. Importantly, however, social forces are not totalitarian. The power of self-reflection lies in the deliberate evaluation of values in light of countervailing beliefs and experiences. Though the capacity for self-reflection is itself dependent on social factors, once born it endows its bearer with the potential to critically evaluate even those factors that brought it into being. Just ask the parent of an adolescent. In the process of forming their own identity, adolescents reject the influences of their parents and adopt a new set of values to call their own. Although at this formative stage “their own” values may simply be peer group values, mature intellectual development begins with practices of critical self-reflection that we continue to exercise throughout our lives.<sup>4</sup>

Because the exercise of autonomy involves re-evaluation and transformation, the process of reflection is one of definition as well as discovery.<sup>5</sup> There need be no permanent core, “true” self that is exposed through reflection. Rather, a person forms herself through the composition of an ongoing narrative that recalls past traits, beliefs, and values, and utilizes them to develop her character further. Though she may revise aspects of her identity in light of reflection, alterations are constrained by the demands of coherence with the person she has been. Autonomy resides in the negotiation of identity between the dual poles of stability and change. As Friedman argues, stability is required so that a person’s “self as a whole, as the particular self she is,” in some way causally determines the action or choice.<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, change is necessary in order to allow for self-development. There is no room for choice if a person is not open to alternate possibilities. Deeply held commitments may be essential to establishing a stable self-concept,<sup>7</sup> but a rigid, intransigent identity is likely to prove inadequate to novel situations and unprecedented challenges. The process of self-evaluation, then, is essential both to articulate the traits, desires, and values constitutive of identity as well as to reject previously held commitments that prove problematic or inconsistent with other values.<sup>8</sup>

A second condition for autonomous action is that *significant* beliefs and values form the basis of action. Significance depends on at least two factors: degree of endorsement and degree of reflection. Friedman argues that endorsed values must be “deep” and “pervasive” in order to motivate autonomous action. Deep values are consistent through time and context, chosen over other values, and used to justify other choices. Values are pervasive when they are used in many situations, relevant in many contexts.<sup>9</sup> Similarly, highly reflective values are those that have been given a good deal of thought, adopted in light of many considerations. Degree of endorsement and reflection varies relative to the agent; choices insignificant to one may be very significant to another.<sup>10</sup>

The third and most contentious condition of authenticity is the lack of coercion. Ann Cudd defines coercion as a lack of choice due to the unacceptability of other options.<sup>11</sup> Though a person acts to do or not do something, she is denied choices she ought to have available. If someone is holding a gun to my head, for example, I could do what I am told or not, but the choice not to act is constrained

by the consequent loss of life. A choice that otherwise would have been preferable is denied by the threat of the gun. One reason that discussion of coercion generates controversy is the difficulty of determining what counts as choices “one ought to have available.”

A *content-neutral account* of autonomy focuses on the procedural conditions of one’s choices, *how* a decision is made rather than *what* is decided. As long as certain necessary conditions of the decision-making process are in place, the choice counts as autonomous, regardless of the value (or lack of value) of the object chosen.<sup>12</sup> Self-reflection constitutes a content-neutral requirement, as I have construed it, because authenticity is determined by the process of evaluation and endorsement without regard for the origin of values subject to this process nor the value system that results.

Coercion undermines self-reflection, however, by replacing the process of evaluation and endorsement with immediate and compelling constraints. Cases of physical coercion, such as the gun to my head, constitute the most overt kind of subversion. I do not consider whether the action conforms to my beliefs and values; I act simply to spare my life. Self-reflection plays no role in my action, and consequently it is not blameworthy.<sup>13</sup> Psychological coercion is more difficult to identify because it involves mental weapons rather than physical ones. The threat of violence or other negative consequence is one form of psychological coercion. Victims of domestic abuse, for example, regulate their behavior in elaborate and self-destructive ways in the vain hope of preventing a future attack. Bribery is a more subtle and increasingly pernicious form of psychological coercion as it undermines action in accord with deeply held beliefs and values in favor of immediate monetary reward. Finally, deception interferes with self-reflection when misinformation influences decisions. For action to be autonomous, the process of evaluating values must be free from these forms of physical and psychological coercion.

My own decisions fulfill the first condition of autonomy by according with values developed through a process of self-reflection. The values according to which I have acted are traditional feminine ones of the sort Sara Ruddick<sup>14</sup> has advocated: preservation of relationships, humility in the face of challenge, and cheerfulness through difficulties. Ruddick argues that these values stem from the practice of mothering and other traditional women’s roles, although they are not restricted to mothers or even women. I have reflected on these values in light of Ruddick’s persuasive reasoning, as well as considered criticism of her work and patriarchal feminism in general.<sup>15</sup> Though traditional feminine values are not and should not be universal among women, I believe that women would benefit from the cultural revaluation of women’s roles. For whatever reason, many women thrive in situations that emphasize cooperation and connection over competition. Even if I have been socialized as a woman to value these traits, socialization alone seems to me to be an insufficient reason to reject them.

Second, my values have been subjected to considerable reflection and have been endorsed to a high degree. These values are deep, affecting many, many

kinds of decisions, from what to have for dinner to whether and what sort of career to pursue. They are also pervasive, having figured in my life for nearly half of its span.

But perhaps they have been coerced. As Friedman has observed, the danger in heterosexual romantic love is that men's wants and values tend to disproportionately influence the choices of the couple, thereby compromising the autonomy of women. In this sort of "asymmetric merger," women contribute more than their share of effort and attention to maintaining the relationship while men garner more than their share of control over joint activities and plans. Even if I am in an asymmetric merger, however, Friedman maintains that I am still acting autonomously, provided my commitment to the relationship is primary.<sup>16</sup> On a content-neutral account, I am not required to choose only things that enhance my autonomy.<sup>17</sup> I can choose to surrender control over future choices in favor of some other substantive value, such as marriage, and still be acting autonomously.

My reflection counts as uncoerced so long as no coercion has actually induced me to choose something that I otherwise would not have chosen. But how can I determine whether I would have chosen otherwise? This question is especially acute regarding the insidious and abiding influences that produce gender-stereotyped behavior. One possible answer is to define coercion in terms internal to the process of self-conscious reflection itself. While engaged in reflection, a woman may say to herself, for example, "If it weren't for these damned gender stereotypes, I would be a bachelor architect."<sup>18</sup> In such a case, her choice to abandon her dreams in exchange for full-time parenting would definitely be coerced, because she considers the stereotypes to be the reason she has not pursued a preferable path. Or, in the case of deceit, considerations listed in favor of a particular choice during self-reflection prove false and thereby discount the reasoning that led to the action. In both of these cases the counterfactual condition would have led to a different result, so the condition counts as coercive. Since my lucid and critical reflections contained no such coercion or deception, so far as I am presently aware, they should count as uncoerced.<sup>19</sup> Therefore, I have fulfilled the second and third conditions of authenticity by endorsing significant values through uncoerced self-reflection.

It may be worth noting that my choice to pursue an academic career is also autonomous by these criteria. The reader of this essay is more likely than many to believe that philosophy is a rational pursuit, but it could well have been coerced. My father was a college professor, and his influence on my choice was no doubt considerable. Nonetheless, I explored several options before enrolling in graduate school after a great deal of reflection and without undue outside influence, and I periodically re-examine this choice in response to the conflicts it produces.

My sitting here right now facing another year of adjunct teaching is an action in accord with my values and therefore is authentically my own.<sup>20</sup> I am "doing it my way," neither traditional mom nor traditional philosopher, in order to best satisfy my values reflectively chosen.

## II. Stay-at-Home Moms, Trailing Spouses, and the Problem of Self-Conflict

One problem with this nice story is that I so often feel powerless and out of control. If one of the most compelling reasons in favor of autonomy is its value to me,<sup>21</sup> I should feel better about being autonomous. Some days are good. When school is cancelled for a snow day, I can take the time to go sledding with my son. When commuter couples relate the trials of traveling and living apart, I feel relieved that I do not suffer similar pains. Then there are the other days. When talking to colleagues about my position as an adjunct, I sometimes see pity, *Schadenfreude* and condescension dance across their faces before they resume a proper professional demeanor. When facing the indignities of my marginal position—bureaucratic hassles, exclusion from university functions, denial of benefits—I am reminded that “my way” fails to adhere to the accepted standards for achievement in my profession.

On these other days I feel powerless, constrained by my adjunct status to a subordinate position in academic society. Then I wonder: If I really prefer these values, why am I so miserable about the consequences that follow from them? Perhaps I am simply experiencing the tension that proves my decisions are not simply the adoption of prevailing norms, changing with the cultural winds. If acting in accord with my values were always easy, my choices would lack significance. As my mother says, adversity builds character. Values are defined as distinctively mine by their potential and actual conflicts with the values of others. My intense discord with the norms of my profession highlights my choices as uniquely my own.

Described in this way, the value-defining discord is an external relation setting my values against those of other people. My problem, however, is not ultimately this sort of external discord. Rather, I suffer from *internal* discord. I want to be both a philosopher and a mom, but it seems impossible to be both. In the move from personal to political, the task is to read these feelings of inadequacy and frustration in light of structural constraints that shape who I am and how I act. As in the longstanding feminist tradition of consciousness-raising, insight into political solutions arises from an examination of apparently personal problems. So, though my feelings of conflict stem from my own values, we will see in the next section how self-conflict is generated and sustained by social and economic structures.

María Lugones vividly portrays the sort of internal conflict I face as a conflict between “worlds.” While intentionally leaving the term loose and open to interpretation, Lugones considers a “world” to be a construction of life, “including a construction of the relationships of production, of gender, race, etc.”<sup>22</sup> A person may inhabit several incompatible worlds, resulting in an internal conflict between two constructions of one’s self. Lugones finds that she is playful and not playful, depending on which world she is inhabiting at the moment. Similarly, I find that in one world I am satisfied with my commitment to home and family, and

empowered by my choices in accord with this commitment. Yet in another world I am unsatisfied and disempowered by this commitment. My reflective endorsement of these choices, therefore the degree to which they are autonomous, is relative to context or “world.” In one world I am highly autonomous; in another world I am becoming less autonomous daily.

This tension between worlds complicates the ideal enshrined in traditional accounts of autonomy as a rational person acting according to the values she has reflectively chosen. If “she” inhabits two (or more) worlds which construct her in contradictory ways, then it seems that no sense can be made of the injunction that autonomous actions accord with “her” values. The classic solution to this tension is to dismiss the force and ubiquity of self-conflict in order to maintain the ideal of a coherent, unified, integrated self.<sup>23</sup> To be autonomous, I must choose which sort of person I *really* want to be and act according to that choice. Harry Frankfurt famously articulated this line of argument in his description of a priority ranking of values.<sup>24</sup> I give a stamp of approval to only those values that pass the test of reflection. To be autonomous, according to Frankfurt, is to be “free to will what [a person] wants to will, or to have the will he wants. . . . It is in securing the conformity of his will to his second-order volitions, then, that a person exercises freedom of the will.”<sup>25</sup>

Friedman also stresses the importance of an integrated self to autonomy; however, she argues against privileging higher-order values. According to Friedman, continued dissatisfaction with a life that is ordered by disempowering higher-order values is a signal for revising those values. If, for example, a woman holds the value “above all else, care for home and family,” she may be moved to reconsider this value by the burden and insecurity of her position as homemaker.<sup>26</sup> In such a case, the woman is acting autonomously by *denying* her higher-order value in favor of her first-order desire for relief from her current position. Friedman suggests a process of integration whereby first-order desires are evaluated in light of higher-order values, and higher-order values are checked by first-order desires. Neither level is privileged.<sup>27</sup> Still, resolution is required; ambivalent action fails to be autonomous because it does not proceed from a coherent self.<sup>28</sup>

For both Frankfurt and Friedman, conflict short-circuits autonomy, because unity is required for action to proceed from a clear and distinct *self*. In Friedman’s words, a self “as the particular self she is” must partly determine autonomous choices and actions.<sup>29</sup> In cases of ambivalence, there is no “particular self” to serve as the causal force of action. The self is divided against itself.

Certainly, ruling out cases of self-conflict yields a theoretical advantage. By defining selves as coherent, unified, integrated beings, we identify a unique locus point as the source of autonomous action. Actions in accord with the values of *this particular self* are autonomous. We muddy our own water by allowing conflicting desires into the mix. But muddy it we must if we want to acknowledge the fact that most of us are ambivalent most of the time, especially if we are women. In my view, the loss of clarity is compensated by the increased complexity in our notion of autonomy. In addition to being a matter of degree, we can see that autonomy is

relative to the aspect of one's self at issue. Paula as family member autonomously acts to become an adjunct. Paula as philosopher rejects this choice because it constrains future career opportunities. Family *and* career are both values I have reflectively adopted and with equal force. When they conflict, neither is less a part of me; my self is simply conflicted. More problematically, my autonomy is also conflicted, functional in one world while thwarted in another.

When the worlds in which we live set us against our selves in this way, we must find ways to deal with this tension. One solution is to keep our worlds separate, to "travel" between worlds, being certain to exhibit the proper self in the proper world. Most people do this every day, moving skillfully through the worlds of home, work, church, store. For some—often white, affluent, male—these worlds are perfectly compatible, so a unitary identity may persist throughout. For others—people of color, the poor, many women—each world presents a particular set of constraints and expectations, such that acting appropriately in one world would be inappropriate, even hazardous, in another. In these cases, careful negotiation is required to keep one's worlds in order so as to avoid being a contradiction—both playful and not playful at the same time, for example.

In relation to autonomy, however, it is unacceptable to simply say—I am autonomous in one world and not in another. Lack of autonomy in any world is problematic and is likely to be felt more acutely when one is autonomous in another context. Especially troubling is the case where autonomy is compromised in the dominant world,<sup>30</sup> because the dominant world defines norms and standards that constrain the norms of subordinate worlds. Indeed, the limits on my autonomy in the dominant world of career tend to suck the joy out of my autonomy in the subordinate world of family—a critical reason I so often feel rotten.

By thinking of my ambivalent position in terms of the tension between two worlds, the political dimension of self-conflict is brought into relief. Because any choice involves closing off alternative options, autonomy will always generate some tension. But in situations like mine that involve decisions to put oneself in a subordinate economic position, the corollary reduction of autonomy involves a gender dimension and a power dimension that call for political analysis. The economically subordinate world of home and family has been traditionally and remains primarily a woman's world. Due to our biological and social history, women assume the responsibility for bearing and raising children. Women are rarely socialized to aggressively pursue a career or to view ourselves as primarily responsible for the financial support of the family. Certainly, there are many, many women who maintain careers, some of whom are the sole income earners for their families. Yet the pursuit of a career for women usually entails the choice to forgo a family or to assume the daily struggle to balance career and family. In other words, women *as women* are likely to suffer self-conflict, because the world of family and the world of career are so structured that the role of mother is incompatible with the role of ideal worker.<sup>31</sup>

The result of this incompatibility can be seen in recognizable types such as my type, the "trailing spouse." Having developed our careers, we have come to



enjoy the challenges of our work and the financial benefits it brings. We are also committed to family with its attendant joys and comforts. Both realms of responsibility carry significant burdens, which compete with one another. To bear and nurture a young child requires a great deal of time and energy. If we have sufficient resources to take time away from work, it becomes increasingly difficult to maintain our career status. Meanwhile, our partners continue to progress in their careers, generating an “asymmetric” financial relationship.<sup>32</sup> The partner’s career plans are given more and more weight in decision making as the caretaker’s career loses momentum. So we trail.

Or we stay at home. Some women choose to put their careers aside completely, at least during the early years of their children’s lives. My two sisters-in-law have made the choice to stay at home and care for their families—with four kids in one household and five in the other. They are brilliant examples of autonomous choice in the terms described above. Each trained for a professional career and made the deliberate, reasoned choice to work as a full-time parent. Nonetheless, both are completely financially dependent on their spouses. To regain economic autonomy would require the considerable personal and financial costs involved in re-entering a long-neglected career.

The trailing spouse and the stay-at-home mom are categories that describe the experience of many women who face the incompatibility between the worlds of career and family. Women who fall under these categories are relatively privileged; they are middle-class members of two-parent households. These types are not intended as inclusive or representative of all women’s experience, and they may not be the most important types of case to consider in evaluating a theory of autonomy. I have chosen them because they highlight a particular tension relevant to autonomy theory, and they are cases within my experience. Further, I suspect that similar tensions arise between other dominant/subordinate worlds, and hope travelers to those worlds will add dimension to the analysis as appropriate.

### **III. Self-Conflict and Liberal Choice: From Personal to Political Autonomy**

The overarching tension in the choices of both the trailing spouse and the stay-at-home mom comes from the way her choices in one world compromise her choices in another. As long as we live in a society that pays for public work and not for private labor, women exercise autonomy in one sphere only to limit it in other. While I agree with those who would count the choices of the trailing spouse and the stay-at-home mom as genuine, autonomous choices, we would be remiss if we did not address the way economic structures (such as whether labor is paid or unpaid) diminish her autonomy. Because personal choices are made within a political frame, an examination of the incompatibility between the world of career and the world of family can be a source of political critique.

In the absence of this critique, acknowledgment of the autonomy of women who choose a subordinate economic position absolves the system that sets some

choices in opposition to others. A truism about autonomy is that free choice entails a willingness to accept the consequences that follow from that choice. You made your bed, now lie in it. Consent legitimizes the system, thereby reflecting the blame for any ill effects of the system back on those who freely chose it. Back in the good old days of Lockean liberalism when everyone (who counted) was a white, well-educated, property-owning man, this simple conditional made a certain amount of sense. Each man, with the guidance of Reason, chooses to make various bargains: to exchange some of his natural rights for greater security and to exchange his labor for property. These choices mean that the man must accept the laws that protect him and the property that his labor earns. In this scenario, liberal government is legitimate to the extent that it functions to enforce the bargains that men themselves have chosen.

Things are no longer so simple since we have begun to count people who are not white, well-educated, property-owning men. The worlds of people of color, poor people and women are structured as incompatible with the dominant world so that choices in one world undermine choices in the other. Consider how the following tropes generate a structural conflict: if you are a woman, you will be a mom. If you are a scientist, you will not be a mom. You can be anything you want to be.

Consequently, the justification of liberalism in a multicultural age is more complicated than simply expanding its constituency as is suggested, for example, in the Rawlsian notion of the "legitimation pool."<sup>33</sup> Simply adding women and members of other subordinated groups to the pool of reasonable citizens to whom the government is accountable does not address the problem of self-conflict. If a woman's values are inconsistent, as I have been arguing, there is no way to rationally promote them all. Thus, there is no single standpoint from which a woman in this position can judge the legitimacy of the system. If we require a woman to choose some values over others in order to assume a unitary, non-conflicted standpoint, the tension she faces between career and family becomes her problem rather than the problem of the system, and resolution of this tension remains personal rather than political. Once she has made her choices, then she has a standpoint from which to judge the legitimacy of the system, on this way of thinking. Prior to this point, she is on her own.

Affirmative action is an example of how a political system can be screened off from critique by requiring that women assume a unitary standpoint. In response to feminist activism against discrimination of women, employers have adopted various policies to incorporate more women into the workforce. Rarely, however, have these policies addressed the obstacles to women's success in the world of commerce that arise from a commitment to the world of home, such as the double day of work for women, the scarcity of adequate, affordable child-care, and the legacy of negative gender stereotypes. Given the existing structure of American business, one possible standpoint for women is the desire for equal opportunity in employment. By accommodating this standpoint, the structure is legitimized and the obstacles to women's success are relegated to the realm of

the personal. If a woman chooses the world of commerce, she must accept the consequences.

If, on the other hand, we recognize that choices made in one world often conflict with values in another world, simple consent is no longer adequate to justify a liberal government, even if everyone is given a vote. For many of us, consent in one realm imposes structural limits in another realm; what is given with one hand is removed with another. In the move from the personal to the political, we need an account of liberal autonomy in a wider context that acknowledges conflicting worlds. Anticipating a bit, I will argue in the next section that a liberal system is obligated to address the crippling effect on autonomy caused by the social and economic structures that generate and maintain these incompatible worlds.

The minimum requirement for liberal autonomy is the development of the skills needed for competent reflection and evaluation. The sort of mechanisms necessary to critical reflection are familiar ones: a strong commitment to the education of citizens, support for widely available and diverse forms of media, and the protection of free speech and free association.<sup>34</sup> These institutional structures are required to help citizens understand and articulate their beliefs and values, and to recognize when they conflict.

If a person is given the appropriate resources to reflect on her beliefs and values and endorse them, she may find ways to resolve self-conflict without compromising her autonomy. For example, women may simply and wholeheartedly adopt a value system that conflicts with liberal values such as equal rights and freedom of association. In a content-neutral account of autonomy, this choice counts as autonomous so long as the choice was made under the requisite conditions of reflection and endorsement. As Friedman argues:

[A] liberal culture should respect and tolerate the practices of cultural minorities in its midst even when those practices violate the rights of females in those minority groups, but only so long as the females themselves choose to participate in those practices and do so under conditions that facilitate autonomy. Those conditions must include the presence of genuine alternatives for the women's choosing, the absence of coercive and manipulative interferences with the women's reflections on their cultural practices, and socialization that is capable of developing in the women real autonomy competency.<sup>35</sup>

Friedman's point is a negative one: minority practices warrant liberal tolerance, even when those practices violate liberal rights. I believe the argument also makes a positive point in favor of restrictions on social forces that are coercive or undermine self-reflection. Because the autonomy of its citizens is the basis of liberal government, social structures that make autonomous action impossible are anathema to liberal legitimacy. Accordingly, liberal governments are justified in efforts to identify and eliminate institutional obstacles to the development and exercise of autonomy skills. In other words, a *positive* obligation exists to restrict coercive social forces despite the general liberal requirement for tolerance.

Humans are complex creatures living in a complex world, so we can expect a fair amount of tension in our lives. For our actions to be autonomous, however, we need to be able to reflect on our choices, imagine alternatives, and weigh the options. We need well-developed autonomy skills even to recognize self-conflict as such. Many women fail to identify the incompatibility of work and family as the source of the pain and tension in their lives, instead attributing their discomfort to personal inadequacies or random unfortunate circumstances. I am lucky to have received an extensive education, including philosophical training, as well as the tutelage of a feminist mother to be able to see the conflicts between the world of commerce and the world of family that generate my irreconcilable choices. I am lucky, but luck should have nothing to do with autonomy capacity. Autonomy is the birthright of citizens under a liberal government. The first responsibility of liberal governments in addressing the problem of self-conflict is to ensure that all its citizens have the capacity at least to identify it. This means that citizens have a right to education and access to information as well as freedom from coercive influences that undermine autonomy skills.

#### **IV. Pushing Liberalism a Step Further**

This responsibility has been met in my case. My choices have been made under conditions of uncoerced self-reflection, and so they are autonomous. Is this all a liberal government is obligated to ensure? It is the minimum, but more is needed to address the source of the constraints on my autonomy. So far I have shown that a liberal government has the responsibility to provide me with tools to assess the systemic constraints on my choices. But a liberal government should also have the responsibility to eliminate these constraints in order to promote greater autonomy. Earlier I argued that autonomy is a matter of degree. If so, then the justification of liberalism that depends on the autonomy of its citizens is also a matter of degree. This point will be difficult to accept so long as political justification is taken to be an all-or-nothing affair. On this view, any amount of autonomy is sufficient to justify a liberal government, and my argument should have ended with section III. If, however, a liberal government's legitimacy varies along a continuum from weak to strong, then an increase in the autonomy of its citizens yields an increase in the justification of liberal government.

What I am suggesting is a revision of the traditional negative conception of liberalism in terms of non-interference into a more variegated, multidimensional conception of liberal justice that is more suited to its variegated, multidimensional citizenry. An advantage of this revised conception would be to shift the burden of justification from the social critic who calls for structural reform to the institutions that structure the choices of all citizens. If autonomy—and therefore liberal justification—is a matter of degree, then the obligation to maximize autonomy rests on the liberal system as a whole rather than on its disenfranchised members.

A result of the shift in the burden of justification is that arguments to address structural sources of injustice gain new force. In my case, for example, some of the

structural features that limit my autonomy as an inhabitant of the world of family are gender socialization, the wage gap between women and men, and the lack of flexibility in my chosen profession.<sup>36</sup> Structural reform would not eliminate conflict entirely—on any given day I still must choose how to spend my time—but it would significantly reduce the negative economic and social effects of my choices within the world of family. By eliminating the structures that subordinate the world of family to the world of career, my habitation of one world need not compromise my autonomy in that world or others I inhabit. Liberal governments obligated to maximize autonomy cannot force me to choose between worlds; they must eliminate the structures that make one world subordinate to the other.

The liberal assumption has been that citizens are autonomous and so government need only allow them to act on their choices. Considerations above challenge this assumption by demonstrating the way structural conflict means that choices in one world limit choices in another. Some would conclude that liberalism fails as a result and should be rejected. I disagree. Liberalism and autonomy are mutually reinforcing concepts: recognition of the value of one strengthens commitment to the other. Because a commitment to the development and enhancement of autonomy in all citizens would entail reconceptualization of the foundations and obligations of liberal institutions, we should not underestimate the resistance such a project would meet. Were a liberal government to truly address the structural injustices brought to light by self-conflict, the result would be radical indeed.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The new mestiza* (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1987) and María Lugones, *Pilgrimages/Peregrinajes: Theorizing Coalition Against Multiple Oppressions* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2003); “On Borderlands/La Frontera: An Interpretive Essay,” *Hypatia* 7, no. 4 (1992): 31–37, argue that women who live on the border of different cultures have a clearer sense of both societies, because the tension between cultures is manifest in their own feelings of self-conflict. Diana Tietjens Meyers, “Intersectional Identity and the Authentic Self? Opposites Attract!” in *Relational Autonomy: Feminist Perspectives on Autonomy, Agency, and the Social Self*, ed. Catriona Mackenzie and Natalie Stoljar (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 151–80; *Gender in the Mirror: Cultural Imagery and Women’s Agency* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), argues that self-conflict can obstruct or enhance autonomy depending on an agent’s ability to negotiate the inherent tensions in her identity.

<sup>2</sup> Marilyn Friedman, *Autonomy, Gender, and Politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 5.

<sup>3</sup> This description may weigh the self-conscious aspect of the evaluative process too heavily. The ingenuity and adeptness of some unconscious forms of responsiveness make them sufficiently evaluative to ground authenticity. See Diana Tietjens Meyers, *Being Yourself: Essays on Identity, Action and Social Life* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2004), chap. 4.

- <sup>4</sup>Meyers emphasizes a multifaceted array of skills such as imagination and communication abilities as a corrective to a rational, high-order analysis of desires and values. Meyers, *Gender in the Mirror*, 20.
- <sup>5</sup>Meyers, "Intersectional Identity," 172; *Being Yourself*, 66–70.
- <sup>6</sup>Friedman, *Autonomy*, 4.
- <sup>7</sup>Harry Frankfurt, *Necessity, Volition, and Love* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).
- <sup>8</sup>It is worth noting that traits such as gender, race, and ethnicity have differing valences in different lives, and so there is no general rule that one or another of these traits will be among the attributes that constitute identity. The social institution of identity categorization often leads to the adoption of gender- or race-specific systems of value, but the force of these value systems impacts individuals in contextually distinct ways (Friedman, *Autonomy*, 10–11; Meyers, *Gender in the Mirror*, 24–25.) As a result, gender identification may be quite prominent for one person, where race identification is less so. In another, the reverse might be true. A third person might be so committed to a particular project or value—space flight, say—that other identifications are irrelevant unless they interfere with the desired goal.
- <sup>9</sup>Friedman, *Autonomy*, 6.
- <sup>10</sup>Friedman is inclined to rule out values that have been adopted upon reflection but are only weakly endorsed. Friedman writes, "it seems intuitively appropriate to say that someone lives her life 'her way' as 'her own person' only when she does so in accord with wants and values that she regards as important to her, and that in fact ground or pervade many of her concerns" (Friedman, *Autonomy*, 6). Nonetheless, preferences that are relatively low on the scale of endorsement may be relatively high on the scale of reflection. Under conditions where a weakly endorsed value is nonetheless the most relevant, a high degree of reflection seems sufficient to count the value as worthy to motivate autonomous action.
- <sup>11</sup>Ann Cudd, "Oppression by Choice," *Journal of Social Philosophy* 25 (1994): 22–44, at 27.
- <sup>12</sup>Friedman, *Autonomy*, 19.
- <sup>13</sup>However, see Claudia Card, "Women, Evil, and Gray Zones," *Metaphilosophy* 31, no. 1 (2000): 509–28, for a discussion of the responsibility persons maintain even under extremely coercive conditions.
- <sup>14</sup>Sara Ruddick, "Maternal Thinking," *Feminist Studies* 6, no. 2 (1980): 342–67; and *Maternal Thinking: Toward a Politics of Peace* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1989).
- <sup>15</sup>My formative sources include: Barbara Houston, "Rescuing Womanly Virtues: Some Dangers of Moral Reclamation," in *Science, Morality and Feminist Theory*, ed. Marsha Hanen and Kai Nielsen (Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 1987), 237–62; Marilyn Friedman, "Beyond Caring: The De-moralization of Gender," in *Science, Morality and Feminist Theory*, 87–110; Seyla Benhabib, "The Generalized and the Concrete Other: The Kohlberg-Gilligan Controversy and Moral Theory," in *Women and Moral Theory*, ed. Eva Feder Kittay and Diana Tietjens Meyers (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 1987), 154–77; Diana Tietjens Meyers, "The Socialized Individual and Individual Autonomy: An Intersection Between Philosophy and Psychology," in *Women and Moral Theory*, ed. Eva Feder Kittay and Diana Tietjens Meyers (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 1987), 139–53; Annette Baier, "The Need for More Than Justice," in *Science, Morality and Feminist Theory*, 41–56; Annette Baier, "What Do Women Want in a Moral Theory?" in *An Ethic of Care: Feminist and Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, ed. Mary Jean Larrabee (New York: Routledge, 1993), 19–32; and Virginia Held, "Birth and Death," *Ethics* 99, no. 2 (1989): 362–88.
- <sup>16</sup>Friedman, *Autonomy*, 121–32.
- <sup>17</sup>Given my overall argument that conditions which diminish autonomy should be rectified, it may seem inconsistent to adopt a content-neutral account of autonomy. The inconsistency is merely apparent, however. My claim is that structural conditions which diminish autonomy, such as those that generate self-conflict, are unjust. They are unjust precisely because they interfere with content-neutral procedural requirements by making choices incompatible, or so I will argue.

- <sup>18</sup> It is a sad fact of the English language that there is no word comparable to “bachelor” for women, since “spinster” implies rejection by men rather than a lifestyle choice.
- <sup>19</sup> John Christman, “Autonomy and Personal History,” *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 21, no. 1 (1991): 1–24 and “Autonomy, Self-Knowledge and Liberal Legitimacy,” *Autonomy and the Challenges to Liberalism: New Essays*, ed. John Christman and Joel Anderson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 330–57, has been quite definite about the nature of the counterfactual. If I would reject any of my values upon learning their etiology, they are not authentic. An objectionable etiology strikes me as a form of deception or misinformation. Even if there is no identifiable deceiver, it seems reasonable to count this case as coercive due to the influence of unwelcome historical forces.
- <sup>20</sup> My husband’s choices are relevant, too, of course. Despite his willingness to move for my job, none of the positions offered a salary sufficient to support a family. I discuss the economic factors that shape women’s (and men’s) choices in the next section.
- <sup>21</sup> Cf. Friedman, *Autonomy*, 56–60.
- <sup>22</sup> Lugones, *Pilgrimages/Peregrinajes*, 87.
- <sup>23</sup> As I will use the terms, ambivalence results from self-conflict. When I am of two minds about something, I suffer from ambivalence. Though ambivalence may come about in other ways, my focus will be on its connection with self-conflict.
- <sup>24</sup> Harry Frankfurt, *The Importance of What We Care About* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988); cf. Gerald Dworkin, *The Theory and Practice of Autonomy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988).
- <sup>25</sup> Frankfurt, *The Importance of What We Care About*, 20.
- <sup>26</sup> Marilyn Friedman, “Autonomy and the Split-Level Self,” *Southern Journal of Philosophy* 24, no. 1 (1986): 19–35, at 31.
- <sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 32. However, classical higher-order theory may not be committed to the strict hierarchy of values suggested here. On this point, see John Christman, “Autonomy: A Defense of the Split-Level Self,” *Southern Journal of Philosophy* 25, no. 3 (1987): 281–93, for a defense of Dworkin’s higher-order account.
- <sup>28</sup> Friedman, *Autonomy*, 14.
- <sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.
- <sup>30</sup> Borrowing from the Marxist concept of dominant ideology, a “dominant world” is the set of beliefs and practices that maintains existing structures of social, economic, and political power.
- <sup>31</sup> Joan Williams, *Unbending Gender: Why Family and Work Conflict and What to Do About It* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).
- <sup>32</sup> See the previous section for discussion of Friedman’s concept of “asymmetric merger.”
- <sup>33</sup> John Rawls, *Political Liberalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996). In this and later work Rawls began to address longstanding feminist objections to his theory of justice, but he continued to assume that citizens have a coherent self; they must be “rational and reasonable.”
- <sup>34</sup> See Christman, “Autonomy, Self-Knowledge and Liberal Legitimacy” for a fuller argument in favor of what he calls Kantian liberalism over Hobbesean liberalism. Martha Nussbaum, *Women and Human Development: The Capabilities Approach* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), and “The Future of Feminist Liberalism,” in *The Subject of Care: Feminist Perspectives on Dependency*, ed. Eva Feder Kittay and Ellen K. Feder (New York: Routledge, 2002), 186–214, argues for a form of Aristotelian liberalism that proposes an even wider range of liberal obligations for the development of human capabilities.
- <sup>35</sup> Friedman, *Autonomy*, 201.
- <sup>36</sup> Susan Moller Okin, *Justice, Gender and the Family* (New York: Basic Books, 1989) and Cudd, “Oppression by Choice,” have forcefully argued for the injustice of the choices women make to compromise their careers in order to care for a family.